Design Language

“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.”

– Chinese Proverb
Design Language

Tim McCreight
Design is essentially a private, idiosyncratic affair. Any attempt to write about design must understand that information is never truly meaningful until it has been creatively put to use. But we work in a world of interaction—between teachers and students, between artists and clients, and with our fellow designers. We need to communicate, and in some contexts our ideas are only as good as our ability to share them with others.

In the following pages you’ll find reflections on the principles of design as revealed through conventional terminology. The alphabetical listing of 100 keywords provides a familiar, non-hierarchical organization that allows you to move into and around the book. Passages are brief and subjective, using dictionary extracts, etymology and a quotation from literature as tangent points. Each entry includes a list of associated keywords that encourage you to navigate from one idea to the next. This is not a picture book, but you should use it in conjunction with lots of picture books. And trips to the beach, the woods and the circus.

Design Language is a tool made of paper. Like other tools, it will function best when it’s been modified to suit your needs, so make notes in the margins, add to the lists, and bend a few pages.
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A dominant theme of all forms of art in the twentieth century is alienation. Humankind is seen as removed from Nature, out of touch with inner or animal needs, disconnected from social bonds and lacking a sense of continuity in time. Given all this, is it any wonder that abstract art is a central response?

Abstract art comes from spirit rather than from nature and in this sense abstract art is spiritual and uniquely human. Because abstraction is rooted in human-ness as distinct from “American-ness” or “male-ness,” it complements the world unity found in technology and science. A color field painting, for instance, can speak outside the restrictions of language, culture and geography.

Some people think abstract art means something weird looking; this is incorrect. Weird is easy, but abstract work springs from and must be responsive to, a physical reality.

A brief summary of a written treatise such as a dissertation is called an abstract. It is based on the real thing but is a more concise version, getting immediately at its essential character.

There is no abstract art. You must always start with something.”

— Pablo Picasso
1 The criticism of taste

2 The sense of the beautiful

3 Having a love of beauty

4 (plural) A branch of philosophy that provides a theory of beauty and the fine arts

*aisthetikos* (Greek) pertaining to sense perception

In common usage, this refers to the large and general sense of a person’s taste. Preferences of color, form, content and scale add up to a person’s aesthetic.

Taste, in contrast to aesthetics, is a more superficial description of preferences in art. It generally informs the larger issues, but is a more intuitive, sensual response. Aesthetics, while primarily related to sensory perception, can be trained and informed through intellectual processes such as instruction, dialogue and study.

There is an element of culture and experience in aesthetics. While it is probably true that people all over the world equally enjoy a sunset or a bouquet of flowers, we have different ideas about what tastes good, sounds pleasant, and functions best.

— Robert Grudin

"Written truth is four-dimensional. If we consult it at the wrong time, or read it at the wrong pace, it is as empty and shapeless as a dress on a hook."

SEE:

Abstract  Innovation
Beauty     Originality
Concrete   Synesthesia
Dialogue   Unity
Gestalt
Anthropomorphic (an-thro-po-MOR-fik)

1  The attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena

(Greek) anthro (humankind) + morph (form) = of human form. Biomorphic is a similar term, but is more general and refers to anything living.

Sometimes designers and artists purposely give human characteristics to their forms, making them angry, soothing, terrifying, and so on. Other times these qualities might be brought by a viewer, who unwittingly wants a work to resemble something familiar.

“Attitude” is a slang term that often conveys a similar notion. I might say, for instance, that a football is a basketball with an attitude.

A designer might purposely give an object a reference to a specific attribute, either for humor or satire. A chair, for instance, might be given a form that seems to slouch back on itself, reminding us of a person reclining.

“The worlds about us would be desolate except for the worlds within us.”

– Wallace Stevens
Anticipation

Anticipation (an tis e PAY shun)

1 Expectation

2 Foreknowledge, presentiment, intuition

antecapere (Latin) = to take before

“Anticipation often includes pleasant anxiety, the feeling that something is about to happen. In this context, we anticipate a holiday, a party, or a recommended movie. Visually this is related to completion, the tendency of humans to perceive a larger, more harmonious whole. Through anticipation we “fill the blanks” with information that most satisfies or resolves our immediate need. The pleasure is in satisfying; anticipation allows us to prepare for that pleasure and enjoy the resolution.”

“The traveler sees what he sees, the tourist sees what he has come to see.”

— Gilbert K. Chesterton

Because of the way we have been taught to read, our eyes sweep across a page or a picture from left to right. As we scan, we anticipate reaching the end of a line and jumping to the left to start the next. Because of this we rush past or fail to see elements along the right margin. People who read in other directions have different voids.

We’ve all had occasions when a long-awaited event was less enjoyable than the anticipation. It seems correct that artists, who are, after all, in the business of looking, should help people look ahead.

SEE:

Completion
Dynamic
Emphasis
Gestalt
Integration
Order
Progression
Balance (BAL encz)

1 A weighing device consisting of a horizontal beam with pans of equal weight on each end

2 A stable state characterized by cancelation of all forces by equal opposing forces

3 A stable mental or psychological state

4 Equality of totals in the credit and debit sides of an account

(Latin) bi (double) + lanx (scale) = having two scales

In Taoist thought, balancing is the ultimate power and goal of the universe. The symbol for this is the familiar yin-yang, a circle divided into a black and white half, each side curving to penetrate and yield to the other.

Most of us need balance in the large issues of our lives, things like landscape, architecture, diet, and relationships. Perhaps we look to art and design in the same way we enjoy a roller coaster ride—an opportunity to temporarily suspend our sense of balance in a controlled situation. We know the ride will end, and we know we can turn away from the painting if the lack of stability becomes threatening.

The first requisite for balance is control. It is one thing to relinquish balance knowing you can achieve it again and quite another to be out of balance, adrift or askew.

The Navajo word “hoz-ro” is translated as both beauty and balance. A traditional greeting may be translated as “Go in beauty” or “Walk in balance.” This refers to the subtle relationships of man and nature, physical reality and spirit.

In music, balance might be analogous to a regular beat. While this makes an acceptable foundation upon which to build a melody, it has the possibility of becoming boring. Syncopation is one way to move beyond that.

SEE:
Contrast Duality Dynamic Edge Figure/Ground
Order Resolution Tension Unity

“...What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity... something like a good armchair.”
— Walt Kelly
Beauty

Beauty (byoo tee)

1 A pleasing quality associated with harmony, form or color; excellence of craftsmanship, truthfulness, originality.

2 Appearance or sound that arouses a strong, contemplative delight; loveliness.

3 The feature that is most effective, gratifying or telling.

bellus (Latin) = pretty, handsome, fine.

Though beauty is subjective and culturally influenced, there seem to be some near universal standards. Shrieking noises are not beautiful, cooing sounds almost always will be. A pattern of dots randomly sprinkled on a surface will probably not offend anyone (it is not ugly) but almost no one would call it beautiful. Rounded curvilinear forms are more likely to be considered beautiful than geometric forms.

Some historical periods have defined the artist’s job as the creation of beauty. Others see the artist as capturing rather than creating beauty and others think the arts should be no more concerned with beauty than anything else.

Which is the opposite of beautiful – ugly or plain?

A thing is not beautiful because it is beautiful, as the he-frog said to the she-frog, it is beautiful because one likes it.”

— Bruno Munari

SEE:

Balance
Confidence
Contour
Economy
Elegance
Harmony
Integrity
Resolution
Symmetry
Unity
Boundaries separate a “this” from a “that,” and a “here” from a “there.” A frame around a picture separates the image from the space around it. The frame is a boundary.

The visual strength of a boundary depends on its contrast to adjacent elements. A gray frame on a gray wall will not separate a print from its environment as much as a gold frame, for instance.

The boundaries of a two-dimensional composition are established by the edges of the paper, page or canvas. Rather than specific boundaries like these, three-dimensional work activates a volume of space in its immediate vicinity. This intuively provides a frame of reference. In order to be called a boundary, the space must be relevant to an observer.

We set boundaries in our personal lives to help us control our relationships, jobs, fears and hopes. These boundaries are usually changeable, like sticks we poke in the ground to mark out a playing field.

“To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.”

— Elbert Hubbard

SEE:
Closure
Contrast
Intersection
Composition
Shape
Figure/Ground
Edge
Tension
Center
Center  

Center (SEN ter)  

1 A point equidistant or at an average distance from all points on the outer boundaries  

2 The middle  

3 A point around which something revolves; axis  

4 The part of an object that is surrounded by the rest; core  

5 A place of concentrated activity or influence  

6 A person or object that is the chief object of attention, interest or emotion  

7 The ring circling a bull’s eye of a target; a shot within this ring  

   kentron (Greek) = sharp point, stationary point of a compass  

In the traditional “rules” of conventional Western design, the center is considered a static location, and therefore something to be avoided. In other cultural traditions the center is possessed of great power, as for instance in a mandala.  

The center of gravity is not necessarily the visual center. It is the specific relationship between an object’s center of gravity and the center of the earth that constitutes stability. This is clearly illustrated in architecture, wrestling or dance.  

Clay must be centered on the potter’s wheel before it can be controlled. This is also true of lathe turning. A gearwheel is generally required to be centered, but there are instances where it is precisely the eccentricity that makes it work.  

When a person is stable, balanced, and free of stress we call him or her centered. This is the goal of meditation, yoga, t’ai chi and other personal therapies. Eccentric (off center), as applied to personalities, means colorful, unusual, and therefore interesting.  

A familiar danger in drawing is to locate early marks dead center on the page, Creating a visual and emotional gravity that is hard to escape. There’s not much happening at the center of a seesaw.  

SEE:  

Balance  
Composition  
Economy  
Figure/Ground  
Grid  
Order  
Pattern  
Sentiment  
Structure  
Tension  
Unity  
Closure  

“Perplexity is the beginning of knowledge.”  

– Kahlil Gibran
Closure

Closure (CLO zher)

1 The act of closing or the condition of being closed

2 Something that closes or shuts

3 A finish; conclusion

clausus (Latin) = enclosed

We have an innate desire to make sense of what we see, and often start by distinguishing “inside” as distinct from “outside”. To achieve this we anticipate and complete a form. By allowing the viewer to complete a form, an artwork establishes a link with the viewer, who becomes part of the process.

( ) We are more likely to read this form as a circle than as two arcs. The enclosed circle is then assigned a contrasting property, for instance, it is “whiter than” or “closer than” other areas of the page. Like magnets, there is a minimum distance that can be bridged by most viewers. Most people will have trouble “closing” this circle (       ).

In relationships we seek an ending (preferably a happy ending) and feel unrest when it doesn’t happen. This is an example of our need for resolution. Closure is visual resolution.

“Silence can be an answer.”

– Cynthia Copeland Lewis
Collaboration

Collaboration (ko la b e RAY shun)

1 A joint intellectual effort

2 Treasonable cooperation with an enemy

(Latin) com (with) + laborare (work) = work together

To elaborate is to extend an idea; to collaborate is to do so with partners.

In order for a collaboration to work well, dialogue must be precise throughout the design process. Definitions are clarified before the dialogue begins, with the understanding that the improved quality of the communication will justify time spent in getting the language clear at the outset.

In a sense all artwork is a collaboration between form, materials, workmanship, and content.

The candor essential to proper collaboration is a natural outgrowth of respect between parties. Respect for ideas mandates a level of clarity that does justice to the ideas being presented. If I respect your contribution to a project, I’ll persevere until I fully understand what you’re thinking. If I want your reaction to my ideas, I’ll be certain I’ve described them accurately.

This kind of dialog, which is inevitable when collaborating with others, can be internalized when working alone. Each of us listens to many voices as we approach a design challenge and we should use the same guidelines of clarity, honesty, and intellectual rigor when we talk to ourselves.

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“Chance favors the prepared mind.”

– Louis Pasteur
The collage process provides a quick way to explore issues of composition, figure/ground edges, colors and values. Its temporary arrangements are useful to examine the effects of one element upon those around it.

Sometimes the word includes the notion of randomness. Early collage artists dropped pieces of torn paper and glued them to a larger sheet in exactly the pattern in which they fell.

O. B. Hardison, Jr. makes the point that collage is a fitting art form for a culture like ours, in which images flit across our TV screens and sounds of Muzak and traffic collide all around us.

Collage is frequently used as a verb, referring to the process of arranging and overlapping various parts to create a more powerful effect than these elements have as separate units.

"The heart has eyes which the brain knows nothing of."

— Charles H. Perkhurst

SEE:

Balance  Fragment
Composition  Rhythm
Compression  Scale
Contour  Space
Contrast  Structure
Economy  Unity
Figure/Foreground  Value
Though composition requires parts, it cannot be considered except as a whole. Composition is to elements as ingredients are to a recipe. You can’t make cookies without flour, butter and sugar, but having those ingredients poured into a bowl is a whole lot different than cookies.

Gestalt psychology as applied to visual phenomena identified the fact that humans see the whole before we see the parts. This would suggest that we have a natural tendency toward completeness or harmony.

There are rules of composition just as there are rules of language. In both cases, these are only useful as starting points. The difference between language (which communicates) and gibberish (which does not) is an adherence to fundamental rules. Conventional spelling, pronunciation, grammar and structure do not make communication good—they only make it possible.

Similarly, in visual language, following rules of composition should be seen as a stepping off point, a minimum standard. Here are a few of the rules of composition:

- avoid placement at dead center
- symmetry tends to promote stability
- diagonals are more active than horizontals
- proximity creates tension
- sameness is frequently boring
- regularity creates rhythm
- contrast exaggerates an effect
- placement in corners creates awkward tension
- arches support weight, inverted arches imply weight
- equal amounts of figure and ground confuse the eye

“The arrangements we make are either pleasing or not pleasing. An explanation is not necessary.”

— Kenneth Bates

SEE:
Anticipation  Completion  Confidence
Figure/Ground  Dynamic  Gestalt
Positive/Negative  Grid
Compression (kum PRESH un)

1. The actual or implied sense of forces pressing inward

2. The engine cycle during which gas or vapors are compressed

(Latin) com (together) + premere (to press) = to press together

Probably we relate to this because of the physical reality of our experience—we have all been squeezed into an over-packed car, or tucked tightly into bed. Our notions of compression are probably complex and mixed.

In the visual arts, compression can be used to pack energy into a composition. Like a jack in the box, loaded and ready to spring, a picture plane or sculptural space can be “loaded” with ingredients that press against each other to create an exciting energy.

In some cases compression is an attempt to concentrate as much as possible into a small space. Brandy was invented when ingenious Dutch merchants thought to get more wine across the English Channel in fewer boats by sending it as concentrate and reconstituting it at its destination. Turned out people enjoyed the concentrate.

“Living is an everyday business. Coming to life is strange and beautiful.”

— Sister Judith Savard

SEE:

Anthropomorphic
Contrast
Dynamic
Fragment
Interval
Monumentality
Tension
In addition to its idea of solid reality, the word concrete carries a suggestion of bluntness as well. Perhaps this is because of our shared experience of falling, at some time in our lives, on a concrete surface. Not only is this real (that could be said of a grassy hillside too); there is something aggressive about the solidness of concrete.

A concrete image can sometimes provide a valuable point of reference. In a world of ambivalence and contradictions, for instance, concrete advice is welcome. In a disorienting visual composition, a concrete element might provide a necessary anchor.

Concrete poetry is a blend of literary and visual communication. It relies on synesthesia to heighten its power as we simultaneously read words and see an image.

When we think of concrete we probably recall its final state—heavy, hard, and massive. We forget that it was once fluid and could register the imprint of whatever touched it.

Opposites: ethereal, vague, enigmatic.

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1. Relating to an actual, specific thing or instance; not general
2. Existing in reality or in real experience; perceptible by the senses; real
3. Formed by the coalescence of separate particles or parts into one mass; solid

concretus (Latin) = to grow together, harden

"There is no wisdom like frankness."

— Benjamin Disraeli
Confidence

Confidence (KON fi denz)

1 Trust in a person or thing
2 Something confided, such as a secret
3 A feeling of assurance or certainty, especially concerning oneself

confidere (Latin) = com [intensive] + fidere (to trust)

People present themselves through their walk, their stance, and their gestures. In the same way, a line, form or composition conveys confidence or lack of it. We learn about body language through experience. We see a basketball player stride onto the court, erect and relaxed, then watch him successfully play the game. We learn to associate the gestures with the result.

Confidence is not automatically the result of practice and experience, but it’s hard to achieve without practice and experience. A lack of confidence can be a handicap. The same is true of an abundance.

One kind of confidence says “I can do this.” Another says, “If I can’t do this now, I have the ability to learn.”

Pride goes before a fall. But without pride you might not be on your feet in the first place.

“They are able because they think they are able.”

– Vergil

SEE:

Anthropomorphic
Dialogue
Dynamic
Resolution
Unity
This broad term refers to the message, narrative, meaning or subject of a work. The question often asked of artists, “Where do your ideas come from?” is probably referring to content.

At least in modern thinking, it is rare to describe any content as “inappropriate” for an artist. This shifts emphasis to the accuracy and power of what is being conveyed. Whatever you say, say it with clarity and passion in a way that will have the most effective result.

We use the word “contents” to describe what’s inside, as in the contents of a box or the Table of Contents at the beginning of a book.

SEE:

Collaboration  Sentiment
Confidence  Structure
Dialogue  Symbol
Hierarchy  Synesthesia
Icon

“The truth is more important than the facts.”
— Frank Lloyd Wright